

IN THE
DAYS OF
VILLAINY

By
GEORGE
MACGOWAN
COOKE

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Cooke

"We might kidnap him!"
"Don't be frivolous." She drew her dark brows and thought intently.
"I don't understand," she complained.
"You want this report for your own paper, don't you? I chance to have inside information that you—that is, the Star—will have it exclusively. Doesn't that suit you?"

The young man turned his back to the room full of chattering people and put his broad shoulders between her telltale young face and prying eyes.
Their conversation was being held precariously at a crowded afternoon tea.

"Look here, girlie," he said, "it's just like this: Yesterday I was city man on the Star, with a good chance of promotion. I felt I had something to offer the girl I love. Today the Record might take me if I went to them with a scoop in my hand—and they're not making a living for the men they already have."

"Oh, Tom," cried the girl, with a note of keen distress in her carefully suppressed voice, "you've not lost your position! How was it?"

The young fellow nodded. "It's Petty," he returned gloomily. "You know what Betts is. I was all right with him till Mr. Markham noticed my work and (as I've been informed by a man on the inside) told Betts to push me as fast as possible, for he thought I'd make a good chief in my department. Betts won't keep a man on the staff who is possible rival. He called me into his private room yesterday morning and gave me an order which he knew I'd refuse to execute. When I did so, he worked himself into a rage and discharged me. Well, I said some things an assistant can't say to his chief before the discharge came. Then I asked to be allowed to leave at once—and here I am. I've acted the fool. I'm not fit to be trusted with your future, dear. I—" His voice broke a little and sank into silence.

"You've done just as I would have you do," the girl returned loyally, "and now if you're off the Star and not on the Record how would this cotton mill scoop affect you?"

"I would square me with Betts if I could beat him on it, and if I could take it to the Record it would assure me a place there. But what's the use of talking? I've tried all I know, and I can't get a word of the story."

"If I thought it would be just right," she murmured. "Tom," looking at him anxiously, "you're very sure nobody will lose money by it if the Star gets left on this?"

"Oh, you mean outsiders! I'm telling you the truth when I say it won't make any difference whatever, financially, to anybody if the Record gets a scoop on this cotton mill business and publishes the fact first that Senator Morgan is in town looking for a site for the buildings."

"All right," said the girl, laughing a little. "You see, he's mother's cousin, and of course we went to the hotel to see him when he first came in yesterday morning. While we were there your Mr. Betts of the Star came up. He and Senator Morgan were in school together and are old friends."

"Mr. Betts is going down to Birmingham to attend a land sale, but I heard the senator promise him that he would allow his name to be put on the hotel register nor permit any of the Record folks to find out that he was here."

"Mr. Betts was to send a reliable man around from the Star the next day—why, that's today, Tom. It's this very evening! And the senator was going to give him the details of the cotton mill scheme, with the names of all the eastern stockholders and, if he decides upon it, the exact location of the mill."

"Isn't that enough to make angels weep?" groaned Tom Harding.

"Poor Tom!" said the girl. "You look positively thin. Have a little more oyster pie. You'd feel amply disposed toward anybody who would help you out on this, wouldn't you?"

"I'd love 'em for life. Well, I reckon I can tear down to the Record office and make the longest item I can out of the fact that I do know Senator Morgan is here and that his plans are coming on all right. They don't even know that much."

"Dear me!" confided the girl to her fan. "Men are stupid creatures!"

"But women aren't," said Harding dryly. "I know you've got a scheme in that pretty little head of yours."

"It's so easy," said the girl, yawning a little. "I heard Mr. Betts making the engagement for his man for late this evening, and the name he used was that of a gentleman of my acquaintance, a certain Mr. Thomas Harding. All you have to do is to go a little early. Then when the senator has told you all you want to know, why, you just say something a little disagreeable, so that when the real Star man comes Cousin John will be furiously angry and won't see him. I'm afraid of you to lack a bit of invention to that."

"At least!" murmured Harding in a whisper. "You're worth any two men on the Star! Say, you ought to be a newspaper man, do you know it?"

"I believe you said something like that to me before, and I have taken the paper under advisement. If I find a newspaper man that's worth having, well—"

She laughed merrily as she rose.

When Harding's card went up to the senator, it found that gentleman seated at a big desk with a pile of papers before him. "I'm glad that fellow's

come," he said. "I have the stuff ready for him, and I want to get it off my hands."

Harding was most affably received. The full details and complete plans were furnished him, together with the architect's sketch of the proposed mill and a photograph of the senator for illustrative purposes.

As he rose to go, with his bundle of documents and well filled notebook in hand, he said: "By the way, senator, wasn't your name recently connected with some sort of a little story—er—sounding. I suppose straitlaced people would call it? It would add spice to an otherwise bald and uninteresting narrative if you'd let me ring that in. Don't you think so?"

The senator sat at his desk and looked at his interlocutor aghast. "Young man," he thundered, "put those papers down!"

"Oh, no," said Harding; "the Star wants these papers," which was certainly the truth, "and as for the other business, why, you may be a deacon from Deaconville for what I know. All sorts of things go into the papers."

The senator had risen and was coming toward him as he retreated. "You tell Mr. Betts for me," he roared, "that if he don't fire you I'll save him the trouble by wringing your neck for you!"

Then Tom Harding had an inspiration. "See here, senator," he said, "you're mad now. Oh, yes, you are. I can see it, though you disseminate it so beautifully. I'll go!" the senator was coming uncontrollably near just then—but I'll be back in about half an hour, when you've had time to cool down."

What the senator said when the card of the genuine Star reporter was carried up to him just twenty minutes later has become legend and story in that hotel.

The bellboys gathered in a delighted cordon to hear him swear as he sent the message that if that idiot ever came back there again or sent anybody else from the paper he'd kill him.

The Star people continued to send men to interview the senator, who appeared to them to be demoniacally possessed. Failing to get even a glimpse of him, though they could hear the sound of his unutterable roarings down the corridor, they not unnaturally gathered the impression—indeed the impression was abroad pretty generally then—that the senator had been wised and dined rather too extensively, and as Betts, who would have saved them that crowning folly, was absent they hinted as much in the next morning's issue of the paper.

It was on this same morning that the Record brought out a complete illustrated history of Senator Morgan's cotton mill deal and a taking little biography and interview with the senator himself.

The cotton mill meant salvation to the overboomed little southern town, and the Record's scoop in giving the first full and authoritative account of its location did several things. It gave the Record a standing long coveted and worked for. It gave Tom Harding a secure position on the Record staff and incidentally placed him where he felt at home.

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